

Computers & Phones Together in a whole new way

By Andrew Haley

The Enterprise

TriTel Networks Inc., a Salt Lake-based company offering telecommunications solutions to the private and public sector, has begun offering a new software telephone technology called softphones.

“A softphone is a piece of software that you run in a computer than emulates a telephone system,” TriTel president Jay Brown said.

Softphones bring the suite of advantages workers expect from office phones to the convenience and cost-effectiveness of technologies such as Skype or Google’s Gmail phone service. Like those programs, softphone software essentially turns a laptop or other computer into a mobile phone by using either the computer’s built-in speaker and microphone hardware or a headset to enable speech communication over the Internet at a fraction of the cost of calls hosted by mobile phone networks or landlines. Unlike Skype and the Gmail phone service, the softphone technology that TriTel is offering enables a remote user to be patched into the office telephone network, and maintain call logs, telephone messages and even recordings of phone calls in a secure intra-office network that can be remotely accessed.

While Skype revolutionized long-distance, particularly international, calling, it was not designed to host the other necessary functions of an office telephone network.

“Skype is really a residential offering. It’s not really used in business. There have been some forays into business, but they have not been successful,” Brown said.

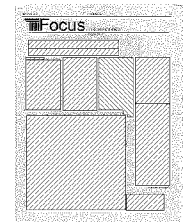
While Google’s Gmail-based phone service, instant messaging and video chat

services have begun to integrate telecommunications into a suite of other services, such as sharable documents and spreadsheets, Google, like Skype and Facebook, maintain those services within third-party accounts they host and store. Those accounts can be hacked into or spied on by providers, which, like Google, maintain detailed records of user activity. Softphone technology enlarges the office, permitting secure intra-office communications, by phone or by instant messaging, over vast distances, without relying on a third-party to host or store communications.

According to Brown, the softphone provides more than secure communications. For businesses whose employees frequently travel, softphones give companies and their employees added convenience, efficiency and functionality. In essence, they allow employees to take their office phone network - work with them on business travel.

“It’s really designed for salespeople on the road,” Brown said. “One of the problems we have with cell phones is, if you call my office and leave a message, where is it? Softphone technology enables you to maintain some integrity of the call. It appears on your computer as a call from the office, so you don’t actually send the call off to a cell phone. With a softphone, I have full functionality of my office phone, even though I’m 600 miles away.”

Brown said the advantages of softphone technology are numerous. In addition to the organizational component of maintaining a sophisticated call database even when far from the office, softphones reduce the number of answering machine



message boxes a traveling businessperson has to consult searching for a potentially important message. Additionally, it allows that businessperson remote access to the office phone network, so that during office hours she can communicate with other office staff via instant messaging (IM) while on an office call even hundreds of miles away.

Brown said that softphone technology streamlines and optimizes the state of mobile telephone technology solutions for businesses. The current trend, he said, is for businesspeople to have an office phone, a company-issued cell phone and a personal cell phone, a situation that creates potential chaos when away on business. Not only does softphone technology reduce the unnecessary complexity of the system, it allows management to better keep an eye on employees' use of time by granting them remote access to constantly updated call logs, no matter how far afield an employee might be.

With softphone technology, someone like Brown, in a meeting hundreds of miles from home, could receive an instant message from his secretary informing him of an incoming call from a client to his direct office line. Deciding to accept the call, he could then make a digital recording of the call, putting the file of the recording in the client's portfolio along with other pertinent documents, all while simultaneously sending secure instant messages asking his secretary to place a missing document saved on a desktop office computer in the client's online portfolio. After the call, he could monitor the office network, checking in on staff productivity from a hotel suite on the other side of the country.

TriTel, which has been in the telephone and communications industry since 1984, does not make softphone software. Rather, it integrates existing office networks with the required IP-enabled phone systems necessary to run the technology. Because they communicate via the Internet, softphones cannot operate on traditional telephone lines.

"We're building the IP networks and

integrating them. We're a software integrator," Brown said.

With IP networks in place, customers can choose from a rainbow of available price points that run from free, for a downloadable app made for the Android smartphone, to hundreds of dollars, for much more sophisticated software, Brown said. He said no matter which softphone software a company operates, the technology, including the free app, which Brown uses on his Android, is very reliable, with one exception.

"What is not as reliable is voice quality," he said.

With the free Android app, softphone reliable voice quality is only as good as the smartphone's signal. And with all platforms, from smartphone to desktop, call clarity is also only as good as the quality of the device's microphone pick-up and speaker hardware. Brown recommended softphone users get a headset for optimum clarity.

"The more you spend on the software, the higher the voice quality, because you are using a managed network, end to end," he said.

According to Brown, the cost of updating an office from an old-fashioned telephone network to a softphone-enabled network, which requires installing necessary IP hardware, runs about \$500 to \$600 per seat. That cost does not include the cost of the softphone software. Nor does it include the cost of upgrading office computers, although that is not always necessary.

Brown said that while most of TriTel's clients upgrade their office communications networks when they move into softphone technology, because the software is browser-based, softphone technology can run on most existing computers. That allows offices to upgrade their telephone network systems without the capital outlays of replacing office computers — up to a point. Offices dependent on obsolete computers would have a difficult time running softphone software, he said.

"If you've still got machines where you're trying to run Vista, it's not going to work well for you," he said.

Most clients use the IP network instal-

lation process to upgrade computers and to shift their office telephone lines to session initiation protocol, or SIP, trunking, Brown said. SIP trunking is, in layman's terms, a telephone network that runs off the same line as the Internet, rather than a separate telephone line. As with the switch to SIP trunking, most businesses find the investment in requisite technologies to host soft-phone software worthwhile, Brown said.

"A lot of people, when they see the functionality, they don't choose to keep their old infrastructure because the functionality is greater. It's not difficult to cost justify," he said.

As for its ease of use, Brown said

even the most technologically averse office Luddite can learn to use the softphone software.

"It's very straightforward. I could show you everything you need to know in 15 minutes," he said. "If you can use your computer, if you can use your mouse, you can learn in a few minutes."

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